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List 33

Sir Benjamin Stone
Victorian Photographer

Sir Benjamin Stone was one of the most prolific amateur photographers of Victorian and Edwardian England. He was born in the Midlands manufacturing town of Birmingham in 1838. He came from a wealthy middle-class family living at Aston Manor. From 1877 until his death in 1914 Sir Benjamin lived at The Grange, Erdington, a fitting country seat for a manufacturer and local politician.

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After a traditional grammar-school education he joined the family business of Stone, Fawdry & Stone — Union Glass Works. Benjamin Stone became a pillar of Tory society; he was elected to the Birmingham Town Council, became Mayor of Sutton in 1886, was knighted in 1892 and became MP for East Birmingham in 1895. However the election portrait of Sir Benjamin in the Birmingham Argus of 1900 described him as follows:

Despite being a staunch Tory he supported many social and philanthropic causes. However in Parliament he consistently and obediently voted with the Tories against any of the Liberal party's attempts to improve the welfare of the working classes. Although claiming to be a Duddeston man he knew little of his constituents and cared less. He was seldom seen amongst them and took no interest in their local institutions. Although sitting for a constituency to which social and industrial reform were of the utmost importance he steadily opposed all such measures. His other passions — photography and travel — left him little time for the business of politics.

As a boy his interest in antiquities had led him to purchase and collect photographs as we now collect postcards and other souvenirs. In 1868 he decided to learn photography and by the time he died in 1914 he had exposed over 22,000 plates. Sir Benjamin was one of the earliest amateurs when photography was expensive and elaborate. He never seemed to dabble in personal picture-making. His photographs were taken *always with the same object — to show those who will follow us, not only our buildings, but our everyday life, our manners, and customs. Briefly I have aimed at recording history with the camera, which, I think, is the best way of recording it.*

He was aware that the sepia photographs of his time had a tendency to fade and when the completely permanent platinum process became available from 1897 he used this light stable process to produce prints of an unsurpassed delicacy of tone. All the prints in this exhibition are platinum prints. By 1914 the price of platinum had risen so high that the process went out of favour.

While an MP he photographed all the noted politicians of his day. He was also an enthusiastic traveller and visited China, Japan, West Indies, South Africa, North and South America as well as most of Europe and he always returned with hundreds of photographs.

His interest in antiquities led him to study, from 1889, the survival of ancient customs, pageants, crafts and ceremonies and he travelled thousands of miles, usually by train, with his bulky whole-plate camera equipment, in search of what he called *history photography*. The photographs in this exhibition are some of these *history photographs* and the prints are accompanied by short notes from the first volume of these photographs that were published in 1905 by Cassell and Company with the title *Sir Benjamin Stone's Pictures*. We are here following Stone's wishes as he believed that . . . *pictures should have explanatory notes to make them intelligible, for however good the pictures may be in themselves, they will be more valuable if used in conjunction with literary matter, condensed as much as possible, and of a perfectly reliable character.*

All these original prints are from Sir Benjamin Stone's own collection of photographs that was presented in 1971 to the Trustees of the Birmingham Reference Library.

Barry Lane, Arts Council of Great Britain